

# France has plans to make the country less divided

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.05.15

Word Count **830**



In this Feb. 7, 2013, file photo, women walk in the streets of Montfermeil, outside Paris. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls shocked many this week by referring to a "territorial, social, ethnic apartheid" in the suburbs, or "banlieues," tinderboxes of social discontent where the values that bind the nation are often absent. Photo: AP/Elaine Ganley, File

PARIS — In January, French-born Islamic extremists shocked the country with three days of terror attacks. In response, the French government launched a new effort aimed at healing social and religious problems. The government hopes to steer children away from messages put online by violent Muslims, by teaching them about French values.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls talked about a divide in the country based on geography, society and race. He felt that this separateness especially affects the "banlieues," which are the troubled suburbs where some of France's poorest people live in giant housing projects. Many of the suburbs are home to minorities with immigrant roots, including many Muslims from former French colonies. The banlieues are seen as places where values that bind the nation are often absent.

Valls called a special government meeting to tackle this divide in society. The proposals that emerged focus on schools. Valls sees them as an "essential link" in spreading French values of tolerance and freedom.

## **"Nothing Will Change"**

Concern about schools ruled a national debate after some children refused to observe a minute of silence for victims of the attacks last month. Twenty people, including the three gunmen, were killed in the attacks on a kosher market and the paper Charlie Hebdo. The paper published cartoons that mocked powerful people, including the Prophet Mohammad. The three gunmen had lived in neighborhoods in Paris and its suburbs.

Many in the suburbs of Paris said they understood why some children did not observe the moment of silence, even though they were against the terror attacks.

"People were killed in the housing projects by police, and there was no minute of silence for them, said Aly Sacko, a 28-year-old in Clichy-sous-Bois. Two teenagers from immigrant backgrounds were killed there in 2005 while fleeing police and hiding in a train station where they were accidentally electrocuted. The incident sparked weeks of riots in suburbs across the country. Similar events have caused smaller riots in the 10 years since.

Sacko, a French-born Muslim, said the prime minister's plans to fix poverty and social problems are a "dream." "Nothing will change, I promise you," he said.

## **Schools Will Play A Big Role**

The plans include special training and testing for school teachers about French citizenship. Teachers will also be trained in secularism and how to teach it. Secularism believes in values that have no religious basis.

Money to help the poorest families with schooling costs will increase 20 percent to \$52 million.

Another idea is to teach children to deal better with online news and blogs and distinguish between violent messages and accurate information. Grade schools will be requested to develop their own radio, newspaper or blog.

It is not the first time France has tried to tackle troubles in the suburbs.

Unrest first broke out in 1990. Violence continued to simmer. The big wake-up call came in 2005 with fiery nationwide riots. Soaring unemployment, a high crime rate and not enough public transportation fed a deep sense of inequality.

## **Ambitious Plans**

France assumes that all colors, races and creeds will blend into a single people. The situation in the suburban housing projects goes against this model. It is illegal to count people in France by ethnic or religious background and diverse populations are expected to blend in.

Yet it is France's government that has pushed immigrants into suburban projects, where people from many countries live and mostly cling to their roots.

When he was president, Nicolas Sarkozy made fixing the suburbs an important concern. In 2008, he revealed a master plan. It included \$728 million to create new trains, more "second-chance schools" for dropouts, and advice for youths wanting to start a company or get on a job track. It also included more police.

The plan grew and changed. There is no clear record of how carefully it was carried out.

For example, take the housing project that was home to Amedy Coulibaly, one of the Paris gunmen. It remains a different world from the government palaces of the capital, just a few miles away. Some doctors and postal workers refuse to venture inside. Even police are careful to enter where drug dealers and criminals rule the area.

## **Getting Projects Started**

Some improvements are visible in the suburbs. One of the toughest projects in the Paris region was demolished, getting rid of its huge apartment buildings that were scarred with graffiti. They were replaced with townhouses.

A police station has been installed in neighboring Clichy-Sous-Bois, where the 2005 riots started. A train that was supposed to reduce the almost 90-minute journey to nearby Paris, however, has not been finished. It may not be done before 2019.

Samir Ouahfi works in a cafe in Les Bosquets. The 29-year-old had little hope that the current government would do better than the one before.

"They say there is equality and fraternity," he said, referring to the French national motto. But here on the gray concrete of the projects, he added, "there isn't any."

## Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article BEST explains the growing problem in French suburbs?
- (A) He felt that this separateness especially affects the "banlieues," which are the troubled suburbs where some of France's poorest people live in giant housing projects.
  - (B) Valls sees them as an "essential link" in spreading French values of tolerance and freedom.
  - (C) The government hopes to steer children away from messages put online by violent Muslims, by teaching them about French values.
  - (D) Many of the suburbs are home to minorities with immigrant roots.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Schools Will Play A Big Role" that explains that this is not a new problem in France.
- 3 Read the sentence from the article.

*He felt that this separateness especially affects the "banlieues," which are the troubled suburbs where some of France's poorest people live in giant housing projects.*

Which answer option BEST defines "separateness" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) to keep apart
  - (B) to pull together
  - (C) to bring into conformity
  - (D) to move to a different location
- 4 Read the sentence from the article

*Sacko, a French-born Muslim, said the prime minister's plans to fix poverty and social problems are a "dream."*

Fill in the blank. By describing the prime minister's plans as a "dream" Sacko is saying that .....

- (A) he thinks it will take a lot of effort and hard work.
- (B) he thinks it's only possible if many people made it their goal.
- (C) he thinks that absolutely nothing will happen or change.
- (D) he thinks that the plan is very vague and unclear .

## Answer Key

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**Paragraph 11:**

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